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ABSTRACT

As part of a series of stories about real-world schools that have achieved substantial success in school improvement over multiple-year periods, this report provides an in-depth look at one school's efforts to improve student learning. The school profiled is Highland Elementary School, located in Salem, Oregon, serving a student population of kindergarten through fifth graders that is primarily low-income and Hispanic, with Spanish as their first language and has a high mobility rate. The report begins with a description of the situation at Highland and the improvements in third and fifth graders' achievement from 1998 to 2000. Changes in practice contributing to school improvement are identified as teaming schoolwide, emphasizing reading schoolwide, forming partnerships with numerous community organizations and parents, extending learning time through the use of a year-round calendar, and aligning the curriculum to standards and student assessments. The key topics addressed in this report are: gaining schoolwide focus for improvement, improving student performance in reading as the cornerstone for all learning, meeting student needs through a bilingual magnet program, and obtaining resources to support school improvement. The report notes three principles underlying education at Highland Elementary: promotion of student learning above all and no excuses for failure; (2) inspired leadership by a principal who is an instructional leader; and (3) continuous staff learning. (Contains 31 references.) (KB)

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Highland Elementary School

Learning by Example

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Learning by Example is a series of stories about real-world schools that have achieved substantial success in school improvement over multiple-year periods. Each issue in the series provides an indepth look at one school's efforts to improve student learning. In most cases, this success is the result of not just one, but a combination of factors.

The purpose of ***Learning by Example*** is to support schools as they work to improve learning for the students they serve. The stories are not intended to serve as how-to manuals, but rather as real-world idea banks for educators interested in engaging in improvement efforts of their own.

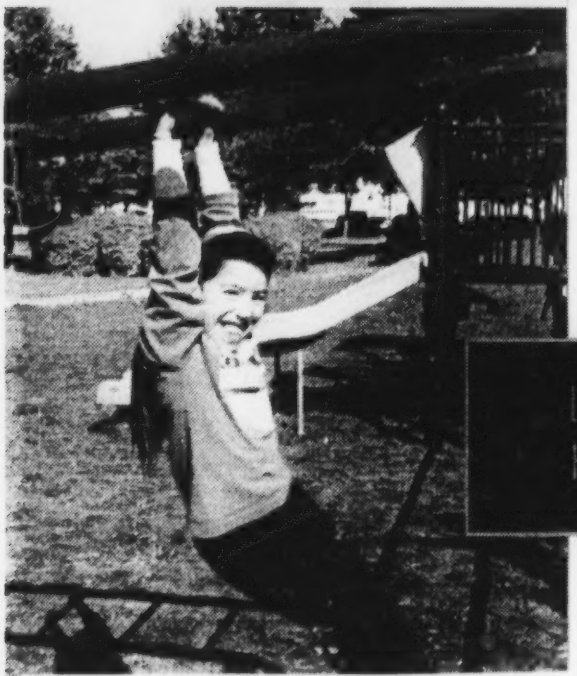
Learning by Example
Story 3: Highland Elementary School

Key Topics Addressed in This Issue

- Gaining Schoolwide Focus
- Improving Student Performance in Reading
- Bilingual Magnet Program
- Resources To Support School Improvement

Changes in Practice:

- Teaming Schoolwide
- Schoolwide Instructional Emphasis on Reading
- Community Partnering
- Extending Learning Time
- Aligning Curriculum to Standards and Assessments



Learning by Example: Highland Elementary School

by Jennifer Fager

Highland Elementary School Snapshot (1999–2000)

Grade Levels Served:	K–5
Total Number of Students:	528
Percent Free/Reduced-Price Lunch:	94%
Ethnic Diversity:	
Hispanic/Latino	59%
White	28%
Other *	13%

* (including African American, Asian, and Native American)

Mobility Rate: 34%

Community Description: Highland is located in the northeast part of Salem, Oregon's capital and second largest city. Highland serves a student population that is primarily low-income and Hispanic. Most students' native language is Spanish, making Highland the site of its district's largest bilingual program.

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Salem, Oregon—To explain why, exactly, Highland Elementary School is so successful would be like trying to recreate an ocean wave with a cupful of sea water. So many factors have contributed to the school's success; so many people have done so much.

Their success can be verified by just about any measurement. Want improved test scores? They've got them. Want demonstrated parent and community involvement? It's evidenced on a daily basis. How about a highly committed staff? From instructional assistants to veteran teachers, the instructional team at Highland is unwavering in its dedication to helping children learn. What about strong administrator leadership? Principal Ruby Price has demonstrated this. If it's validation through outside sources that's important, Highland has that, too. Look at the number of grants the school has received during the past few years or at the school's Oregon Department of Education excellent rating (only one other Salem school received this rating on Oregon's recent statewide school assessments).

Any way you slice it, good things are happening at Highland Elementary School, although all these positive elements may not be visible to the average passerby. Those who know the "old" Highland, however, sit up and listen when they hear about the school's renaissance. They can't believe that test scores have increased so much, or that attendance is so steady, or that parent night participation is so high that the school gym can scarcely contain the people who come.

According to education experts, Highland Elementary has many reasons not to be successful. The school's poverty rate, for example, looms around 95 percent, as indicated by free and reduced-price lunch numbers. Examine the school's 34 percent mobility rate, evidence showing constant transition and flux. Perhaps the fact that 47 percent of Highland students speak limited English would convince many educators to steer clear of the school. It used to be that way.

It used to be that teachers who worked at Highland were pitied, and the school wasn't the top choice for many local parents. Test scores wallowed near the bottom, students came and went, and so did staff. However, things have changed at this inner-city school. Nothing is quite the way it used to be.

The Situation

The grounds of Highland Elementary School do double-time as playground and city park. Situated in northeast Salem, the school is surrounded by largely low-income neighborhoods that are home to the bulk of the city's Hispanic immigrants and migrant workforce. Two playgrounds flank the school's north and east sides. Coated with fresh bark chips, the playgrounds sport red, blue, and yellow structures offering calorie-burning, giggle-producing play options. Fields wrap around the south side of the school, while the school's west side faces Salem's busy Broadway Avenue. Winding sidewalks, mature trees, and well-kept flower bushes punctuate the school's grounds.

The building itself is a three-story brick structure, erected in 1912. To accommodate growing enrollment, the school purchased two modular classrooms several years ago and these now sit on the school's west side. Through the front doors and up a short flight of concrete stairs a sign greeting visitors reads: *Highland Parents & Volunteers—Always Needed, Always Welcome* in English and *Padres Y Voluntarios De Highland—Siempre Les Necesitamos, Siempre Son Bienvenidos* in Spanish. As a bilingual magnet school, Highland works to facilitate communication in both English and Spanish. The hallways are filled with displays of student work, student recognition notices, and information for parents. Unlike many other schools, nearly everything is written in both languages. Outside one third-grade classroom, each student's goals for the school year are displayed. Commonly-held student goals include learning multiplication tables and being a good student. Depending on a student's language strength, the goals are written in English or Spanish. Highland was built in an era when schools were regarded as no-nonsense institutions, where neutral walls and concrete floors prevailed, but now the school has pale pink walls more congruent with the school community's desire to be warm and welcoming.

The Results

One would assume, of course, that all the factors that challenge Highland—high mobility, high poverty, limited-English speakers—would point to a school in distress. There is an inherent danger in such assumptions, for they are guesses informed by past experience, and the past is irrelevant at Highland. This is a school that works not because of circumstances, but in spite of them. Results have been impressive.

Third Grade. From 1998 to 2000, the percentage of Highland third-graders passing state math standards jumped from 33 percent to 72 percent (see chart in Figure 1). The 2001 results show a dip to 54 percent passing, not an unusual phenomenon in improving schools. As would be expected in a school with a high percentage of English language learners, reading is a greater challenge. Growth has been unsteady, with 50 percent passing in 1998, and an amazing 81 percent passing in 1999. The percentage of third-graders passing the reading standard dipped back to 46 percent as of 2001. Again, this pattern of performance is not unusual, but it is a cause for concern.

Fifth Grade. Fifth-graders have shown a steadier pattern of improvement (see Figure 2). In math, the percentage of students passing state standards grew from 8 in 1998 to 55 in 2001, with no dips yet. From 1998 to 2000, the percentage of fifth-grade students passing state reading standards increased from 11 to 56, then dipped back to 40 percent in 2001. Other than a dip to 9 percent passing state math problem-solving standards in 1999, growth has been steady in this area, increasing from 16 to 38 percent passing during the 4-year period.

To understand why Highland Elementary has made such impressive gains, it is important to understand the philosophical foundation of the school. From there, all begins to make sense.

Fig. 1

Met or Exceeded State Benchmarks
Highland Elementary School, Grade 3

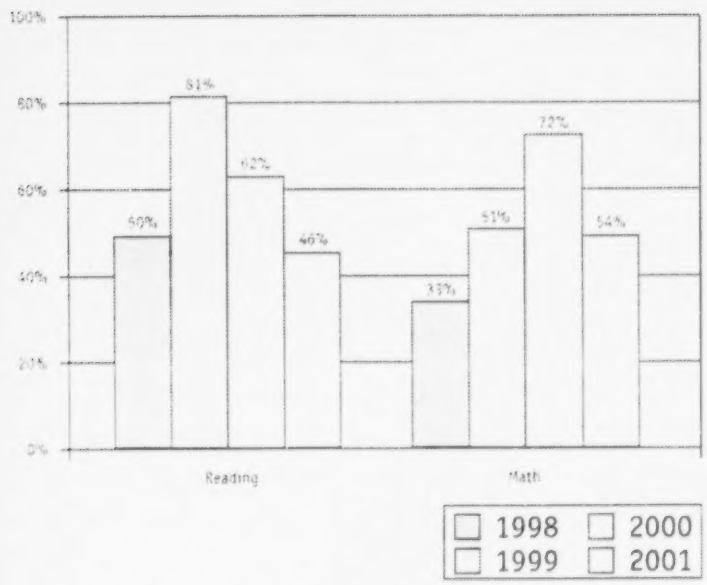
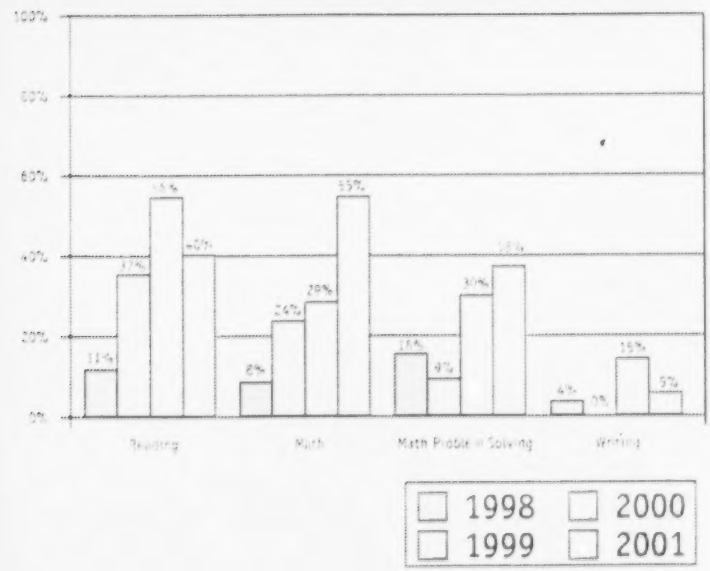


Fig. 2

Met or Exceeded State Benchmarks
Highland Elementary School, Grade 5



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Something's in the Air at Highland

There's something in the air at Highland Elementary. You hear it over the loudspeaker each morning when the school pledge is recited:

I believe in myself and my ability to do my best at all times.

I will act in such a way that I will be proud of myself and others will be proud of me too.

I will not waste this day because this day will not come again.

You hear it when music teacher Nancy Wilhite pumps her accordion and leads the children in a rousing rendition of Highland's song. You hear it from the kids themselves. Five-year-old Seren talked quietly to himself recently about doing his best as he searched through a magazine for the letter "M." When asked to repeat himself, he said, "The lady on the speaker says you should do your best at all times and do your hardest." And, you hear it from the staff as they continually use words such as "relentless," "committed," "respect," and "we."

The motto at Highland is "Reach for the Stars." Not surprisingly, star symbols are everywhere. The kids know that each point on the star stands for an expectation. Students are to be:

1. Respectful
2. Responsible
3. Safe
4. Proud of their personal best
5. Positive

Beyond these five expectations for behavior, there aren't many rules posted in the school. That's not to say that behavior problems don't exist; in fact, there seem to be quite a few some days. However, Highland educators choose not to

get bogged down with discipline. Education experts would say that the "something" in the air at Highland is a healthy school climate. It's what happens when teachers feel good about teaching and students feel good about learning. It's what pumps this school's heart and sets the tone of success.

Piece by Piece

Not that she would admit it, but keys to the success of Highland Elementary can be found in the hands of Ruby Price, principal of the school from 1997–2001. When asked about the school's success, she likes to credit the fine staff who supported her during her four-year tenure, or she points to the strong parent group that is actively involved at the school, or to her predecessors who began much of the work now in place. Certainly, all are critical pieces for a successful school, but the power of a strong leader to effect change should not be underestimated.

Price's early years in education were a mixture of time spent as a preschool teacher and time helping to manage a youth camp. Looking back, she recognizes this as a formative period in her growth as an educational leader. During this time she realized learning should be—has to be—fun to truly engage children. She also realized she thrived on a combination of administration and instruction.

For Price, the years that followed provided additional education: five years as a reading specialist, two as an assistant principal, and three years as a principal/district Title I coordinator, all in Salem, Oregon. Along the way, Price realized that to communicate effectively with all students and staff she needed to learn Spanish. Unable to take the time for a formal class, she managed to become fluent within a couple years of self-study. In 1997, Price was named the new principal at Highland. She replaced a highly regarded administrator who had been at Highland for many years. Admittedly, she found it difficult to come in as the unknown, untested principal. In her unfailingly positive way, Price says that when she came to Highland Elementary, however, she "came home." She saw potential: "a school that had so many possibilities and strengths that were hidden from view."

Gaining Focus

Price points out that she merely built on a foundation already laid by other leaders. She cites school programs such as Family Book Adventure Nights, reading tutors, the pre-K program, and the school's Schoolwide Title I designation, which were in place under other administrators. Her staff is equally quick to point out, however, that none of the school's current success would have happened without her. "She was the right person at the right time," says Highland's Instructional Facilitator, Judy Hansen. Teacher leader Jessica Smith remembers the school before Price was at the helm. She describes the school, with its low achievement and limited parent involvement, as having a mixed tone—some staff members were justifiably burned out, some were content with things as they were, and some yearned for a successful school with fire and vision. Price,

of course, shared the latter viewpoint. She came to the school with a couple of simple educational philosophies and found that many of the staff shared them. They are: (1) No excuses will be made for student failure, and (2) Student learning will be at the heart of all decisions made in the building. A third belief became the instructional foundation: Reading is the gateway skill upon which all other academic success is built.

To solidify these principles in everyone's hearts and minds, Cori Julius, teacher leader at the time, led the staff through a series of simple exercises. For many Highland educators, the exercises were a defining moment on their road to reform. They all knew numbers of things blocked academic success for Highland students. For many students, just getting to school was a challenge. Coming clothed, fed, and healthy wasn't a given. A supportive home environment where young children were read to, received homework assistance, or had access to school supplies was true luxury. Obstacles seemed unending, so to make it concrete Julius had the staff list all the obstacles they noticed. Together, staff members brainstormed every barrier to Highland's success. They itemized the list according to factors they could control or change, and factors that were out of their control. They also listed school strengths and positive attributes associated with Highland. With lists complete, the staff acknowledged they could not affect those things that were out of their control. Staff jointly agreed not to dwell on these things any longer. Staff began to shift their focus toward Highland's strengths and things that could be changed. This was a process of letting go and of stating things to come.

Highland Elementary was "a school that had so many possibilities and strengths that were hidden from view."

—Ruby Price, Principal 1997–2001

Principal Ruby Price, right

A last exercise also involved generating a list. It was a list of dreams. They called it "a wish list." On it were things like a school-wide reading curriculum and extra days for staff development. Certainly, in the whole scheme of wishes, they weren't asking for much—just the two things most schools are shortest of, money and time. Yet, having it all in front of them, talking about it, dreaming about what the school could be, got everyone thinking and believing somehow it could all really happen.

Here the Highland Elementary story departs from similar school reform testimonials. Com-

mon are tales of top-down mandated reform, school reconstitution, and community opposition where a certain amount of upheaval is expected as a sub-plot to school success stories. Blame it on Price's ability to be both dove and bulldog, laborer and chief executive officer. Somehow, change at Highland was not bitterly divisive. Certainly, there were those who had reservations, and those who were just plain tired, but that did not sway Price or the rest of the staff. Wheels of change had started to move forward.

Later during that school year, Highland's site council—comprising the principal and assistant principal, eight certified staff, three classified staff, and three parents—moved forward from the teachers' wish list to write their school improvement plan in an effort to include everyone's voice in the vision-building process. The school also surveyed staff, students, and parents about what they would like to see the school become. Gradually, without backing down on the vision, and without a battle, a new dream settled in. Some teachers left Highland Elementary that year, reputations intact, heads held high (Price wouldn't have it any other way); others signed on to the new mission of the school. Through all, the simple expectation remained: Highland Elementary would become a successful school.

Now Is a Good Time To Learn

It's been said that when you stop learning you die. That's probably closer to the truth than most people care to admit. To live a life enriching to self and others means to learn continuously. Just as children learn every day through each experience, so do adults. At Highland, it's now a given that staff learning is "standard operating procedure." Staff learning is part of building the school culture, not something done in isolation, not an activity happening sporadically when a great workshop comes to town. At Highland, where the primary emphasis for professional development is either reading instruction (specific to the reading program Success for All) or Oregon standards/benchmarks, teachers learn continually. What's more, they learn together in teams.

Teaming is pervasive at Highland. There is instructional teaming between individual classrooms, particularly among rooms of students who speak only Spanish and rooms of bilingual students and those who only speak English. In these cases, teachers work together to ensure all students are receiving instruction in key academic areas in their strongest language. Instructional teams also use

thematic teaching as a tool. This way, a student just learning English will hear a concept introduced first in Spanish by a bilingual teacher during language arts instruction. Then, the concept will be discussed again as part of the thematic unit later in the day by an English-speaking teacher. This makes the concept familiar to the student.

Consider the solar system as a content theme example. In the morning, Spanish-speaking students would read and write about the planets, the rotation of the earth, and the constellations in Spanish with a bilingual teacher. In the afternoon, their math instruction (delivered in English) would center on problems related to the solar system, such as calculating the distance between planets. The morning instruction would familiarize students with terminology and concepts, thus making the afternoon instruction more relevant and applicable.

Teaming also exists at Highland among primary-level (kindergarten through second grade) and intermediate-level (third through fifth grade) professional development teams. On a weekly basis, teams meet and discuss issues pertinent to their practice. They examine curriculum, plan thematic instruction, and talk about teaching strategies. Sometimes, teams gather to learn new skills through specific training or reading. Together, the teams work to solve common problems. Team meetings often piggyback on Success for All component meetings, where teachers discuss student grouping and issues relevant to reading instruction.

To accommodate weekly professional development team meetings, the school—with the full support of the parents—instituted a day of early release each week. Fifteen minutes are added to each Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday, allowing students to be dismissed at 1:45 on Wednesday. The staff has found this concentrated planning time indispensable. Parents also supported the staff's desire for three days during the year devoted to student assessment and regrouping for reading instruction. Students do not come to school on these days, so teachers can devote themselves to instructional and professional development activities.

A leader selected from each grade-level team is responsible for facilitating meetings. This person is also on the school's leadership team, which represents the third level of teaming in the building. The leadership team meets monthly to discuss building management issues, such as scheduling, class size, or coming events. The leadership team consists of grade-level leaders plus the principal, assistant principal, instructional facilitator, teacher leader, bilingual team leader, librarian, office manager, lead physical education teacher, Reading Excellence coordinator, and community outreach coordinator. With all staff represented in the leadership group, problems are rarely ignored or alienating decisions made.

At Highland Elementary, staff use the term "inclusivity" to describe their process of shared decision making and shared responsibility. "Everyone is a teacher here," states Price. "Everyone is part of the solution." In yet another example of how Highland walks its talk, everyone *feels* like part of the solution, too.

Visitors fortunate enough to spend some time at Highland will receive the grand tour, making expected stops in the library and class-

rooms. But, the tour also includes the lunchroom and an introduction to the director of food services. "Good nutrition is key to successful learning," notes Price as she commends the school's cooks for their contributions to the school's accomplishments. The tour also includes a pass through the vintage boiler room to see the custodian's office. Price explains the custodian's critical role in the school's success. "Without her," Price says of the custodian, "things just wouldn't happen as smoothly." Everyone is noticed at Highland.

Valuing everyone's contributions also means freeing people to take risks and acknowledging that not everything will work. Any worthwhile effort requires trial and error. Yet somehow, when individuals feel empowered and valued, failure isn't absolute or final. At Highland, when something doesn't work it means taking time to learn from the situation and then moving on. In it all, the important element is people working together *for children*.

Whether this means including all staff—and parents—in the preparation of a grant proposal (the school community team working on the school's Comprehensive School Reform Development grant had 22 members), or supporting parents' efforts to implement programs, all contributions are valued.

Sometimes, contributions involve dreams of things that could be and at Highland dreams are important, too. There is a phrase for it here: "Managing from the future." Synonymous with the familiar concept, "the power of positive thinking," at Highland it means that, even when the school had dismal test scores and limited community support, staff began to talk about Highland Elementary as if it were one of the best schools in the district. They began to tell students how fortunate they were to attend Highland. And Highland staff continued to dream about programs they could implement to further meet students' needs.

Money Helps To Make It Happen

While the staff dreamed, Ruby Price saw her principal's job as making dreams reality. As much as humans may believe in people power and the difference helping hands can make, the truth for schools today is that resources—human and financial—are essential. Good intentions don't pay for materials, training, and facilities. Five years ago, Highland needed money to make changes. The district had only so much to allocate, so Price took a hard look at how funds were being spent in her building. She changed allocations where there was opportunity. Then, she and her staff began looking elsewhere. They investigated many sources of private and public funding. By making efficient use of existing resources and by aggressively pursuing a variety of grant funding sources, Highland educators' dreams slowly began to come true.

The first large sum came in 1998 when Highland obtained a three-year Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration (CSRD) grant from the U.S. Department of Education for $225,000 (given in yearly increments of $50,000 to $75,000). Appropriated at the federal level and allocated by states, CSRD funding provides high-needs schools, particularly Title I schools, with the means to implement research-based schoolwide improvement programs. To qualify for funding, schools must develop programs that integrate curriculum and instruction, professional development,

parental involvement, and other key areas. Schools are encouraged to adopt an externally-developed reform model as part of their program. Highland chose Success for All as its model for change.

The next two large grants came close together in 1999. The school received a two-year Oregon Reading Excellence grant for more than $400,000 and, on their third attempt, a three-year 21st Century Community Learning Center grant from the U.S. Department of Education for more than $300,000. The intent of Reading Excellence money is to provide funds to very needy districts and schools for reading instruction and its support. At Highland, the grant is used to support an array of efforts, including a full-day kindergarten (piloted in the 2000–2001 school year), Success for All instructional materials, parent education initiatives, home visits, and staffing for nighttime parent events. The grant also funds (to varying degrees) parent-involvement activities related to reading and the school's Reading Buddies volunteer program.

Highland's 21st Century Community Learning Center (CCLC) grant supports the school's extensive after-school program known as HEROES (Highland Elementary Reaching Out for Enrichment and Success). HEROES was part of 903 similar programs implemented with CCLC money during the 2000–2001 school year, all of them intent on supporting community needs beyond regular school hours. The CCLC program targets funds to high-need rural and urban communities. Additionally, the grants are generally awarded to multiple schools within a district that collaborate to plan and implement the after-school learning centers together. In the Salem-Keizer School District, Highland is one of four elementary schools receiving CCLC money.

Spanish Bilingual Magnet

There are two distinct languages spoken at Highland Elementary School: English and Spanish. Community school outreach coordinator Carolina Broderick Sanchez also refers to a common "third language" spoken by everyone at the school—she calls it "the language of caring." Of all the languages, caring seems to speak loudest.

Spanish and English are used interchangeably at Highland. Conversations among students and adults, signs on walls, books in the library, and every communication sent to parents are in both languages. Nearly 70 percent of teachers and 80 percent of instructional assistants are bilingual at Highland, and can thus provide all children and their families with an opportunity for clear understandings. Beyond communicating words, the staff's bilingual abilities show cultural respect and cultivate trust.

Highland began its bilingual program in 1975 as one of two Salem schools implementing a transitional bilingual model, thanks in part to federal Title VII grant money. Transitional bilingual programs generally provide students with initial academic instruction in their native language, but gradually increase instruction in English each year, with transition to all-English instruction by third grade. By 1985, the district felt research pointed to a maintenance approach to bilingual education. A child's first language is maintained for improved academic achievement while teachers work with students to develop English-language competence. According to district specialists, research behind this method indicates that it takes five to seven years to become academically competent in a second language, and that, if English language learners (ELL) cease to receive instruction in their first language, they would be left behind their same-age peers.

Convinced that a maintenance approach better suited its growing Hispanic population, the district adopted it. In 1990, the district received another five-year federal Title VII grant to implement a "two-way" bilingual approach. Two-way bilingual models group language-minority students from one language background in a classroom with language-majority (in this case, English-speaking) students. Teachers provide instruction in both languages. However, due to some district changes, as Salem bilingual program specialist Lin Crimshaw describes, "Highland ceased participating in the federal grant and returned to being a maintenance program about 1993." It has remained a maintenance program since that time.

Highland is referred to within the Salem-Keizer School District as a "Spanish-bilingual magnet school," although it is not an official magnet school in the traditional sense. Originally, magnet schools were designed as desegregation

tools. Reformers viewed magnets as a peaceable, voluntary alternative to the divisive and politicized mandatory busing of the 1970s. Magnet schools achieve desegregation by drawing diverse students into inner-city, often homogeneous schools. By means of a specialty area, such as performing arts or technology, the magnet schools can attract a wider mix of students who gain specialized instruction beyond what they could in a typical public school.

Although Highland Elementary has a well-defined specialty area, it is different from most magnet programs in that its bilingual specialty was built around an existing instructional need. The district ensured that at least one high-caliber bilingual program existed in the Northeast Salem area, rather than having pocketed efforts in numerous schools. The district selected Highland as the program site because its surrounding neighborhood houses the city's largest Spanish-speaking population, and stood to benefit most from a full-blown bilingual program. Because resources and expertise are concentrated at Highland, the district buses in children needing high-quality Spanish instruction and academic development from neighboring school attendance zones.

Highland receives additional district funding based on the enrolled number of ELL students. These funds are allocated for this particular student population and would follow them, but Highland receives a much larger percentage of such district funding because ELL students number significantly higher than in any surrounding school.

Beyond communicating words, the staff's bilingual abilities show cultural respect and cultivate trust.

Instructional Emphasis

In the medical profession, when a surgical team collaborates to perform an intricate operation, each team member knows his or her specific role and knows the goal of the procedure. There can be no ambiguity. The mission is clear and focused: successfully bring the patient through. Doctors know there are certain things beyond their control and a risk something might go wrong. Years of training and experience, however, prepare medical teams to deal with the unforeseen occurrences.

In schools, too often teachers do not coordinate efforts, nor do they share a common goal. Instead, they "operate" in isolation without a cohesive focus. More schools, however, are realizing the power of a united mission. When schools zero in on one important "ailment" and all work together to find a remedy while accentuating and drawing on the school's strengths, many other things fall into place. At Highland, the cornerstone of all learning is reading. Due, in part, to Price's expertise in reading, the staff recognized four years ago that, without reading skills, children simply cannot progress in any other subject area.

Staff also understood that many of their students couldn't read at grade level or even at a basic level. State reading scores painted the picture in grim reality. In 1998, only 11 percent of fifth graders were able to meet state standards in reading. This meant that the vast majority of Highland students—nearly 90 percent that year—were leaving the school completely unprepared for the academic demands ahead.

Highland needed a solution fast. Teachers couldn't stomach the thought of churning out one more year of non-reading students. They decided to make reading instruction a top priority. For 60 minutes every day all primary classrooms would have reading instruction, grouped by instructional level and language. Teachers teamed to coordinate instruction. In the 1998–99 school year, intermediate teachers restructured their reading instruction, too, creating 90-minute blocks devoted solely to reading. Within a short time, test scores reflected these efforts. Well over half of the school's fifth-graders met state standards in 2000.

At Highland, the cornerstone of all learning is reading... the staff recognized... without reading skills, children simply cannot progress in any other subject area.

There was more work to do, however. Fortunately, the school's 1998 Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration (CSRD) grant provided the needed boost. It afforded the means to implement a schoolwide reform model. Staff wanted a model focused on reading to meet their Spanish-speaking students' needs and to support early intervention, student attendance, family involvement, ongoing staff development, regular assessment, and consistent homework.

To Highland educators, the Success for All (SFA) model best met these diverse needs.

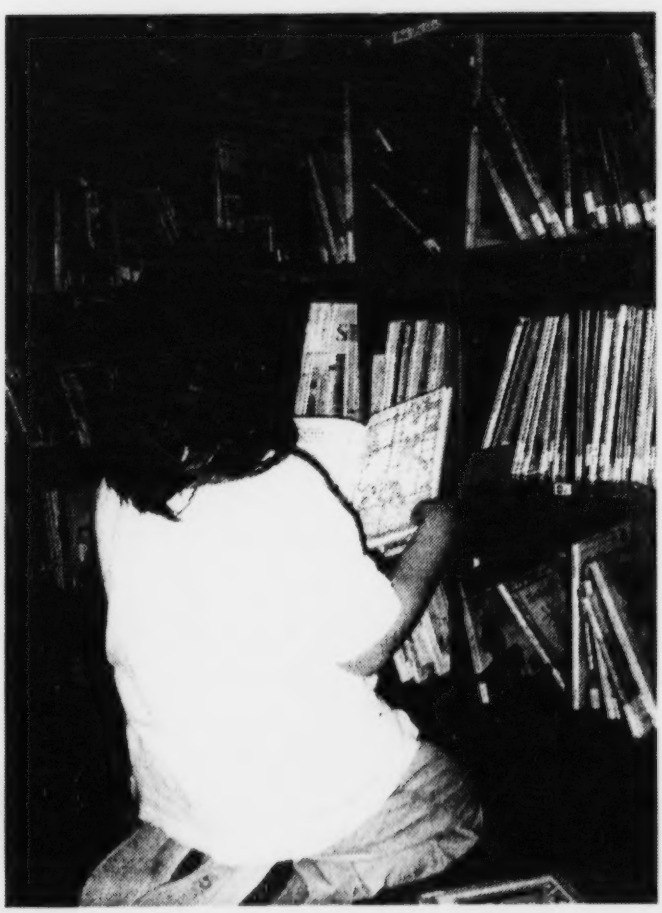
SFA, developed by Robert Slavin, Nancy Madden, and a team of researchers from Johns Hopkins University, is a highly-structured pre-kindergarten through fifth grade school reform model. Almost 2,000 schools have implemented SFA during the past decade. SFA integrates curriculum (reading), process, and whole-school effort. The program works to prevent reading problems for early learners, and to swiftly intervene at the onset of reading difficulties for all others. Similar components are evident in all SFA schools; several are especially prominent at Highland:

- **Uninterrupted reading instruction and practice.**

For 90 minutes every day, every student at Highland reads. Although this is a feature common to all SFA schools, Highland had it in place a year before SFA implementation. Nothing comes between Highland students and reading—not field trips, not pull-outs, not anything. From 8:40 to 10:10 every morning students in primary grades receive reading instruction. From 10:20 to 11:50 intermediate students receive reading instruction. Creating uninterrupted instructional blocks is a challenge requiring all staff to cooperate and compromise. Highland staff visited several SFA schools and viewed sample schedules,

then set about creating a schedule for Highland. The job went to physical education teacher Scott McCormick, who patiently negotiated with teachers and drafted schedules with which they could live.

• **Instructional facilitator.** Judy Hansen is the Highland Elementary SFA instructional facilitator. Required in every SFA school, instructional facilitators oversee the program's implementation. For Hansen, at Highland six years as a Title I coordinator, special education teacher, and now as the instructional facilitator, no day is ever the same. She coordinates all reading assessment and testing, from schoolwide assessment days to the instances of new students needing appropriate placement. She is the school's liaison to SFA program developers and an information conduit regarding SFA training and implementation. As Highland's resident SFA expert, she assists teachers and conducts regular SFA staff training. Four mornings each week she is in classrooms, observing SFA in action and offering teachers tips and strategies to improve. Hansen also monitors logistics of the school's 30 reading groups.



• **Smaller groups, frequent assessment.** Highland students receive reading instruction in mixed age/grade groups based on their instructional level. This practice eliminates need for multiple groups in one room and increases the direct instruction each child receives. Many staff members beyond classroom teachers are tapped to teach reading, including the librarian, the special education teacher, the assistant principal, and several instructional assistants. To accommodate lower teacher-to-student ratios (groups average around 15 students), reading groups are tucked into spaces from the library and the cafeteria to the teachers' lounge. Instructional-level groups are altered regularly as students' needs indicate. (Price is careful not to refer to instructional groups as "ability grouping," a term often associated with the ill-perceived practice of "tracking.")

In addition, students are assessed regularly. First- through fifth-grade students are assessed every eight weeks to determine whether they are making adequate progress in reading. Teachers use formal reading comprehension assessment measures and observation and judgment. They use resulting information to modify groups, to target alternative teaching strategies, and to make decisions about whether students need

tutoring, family support interventions, or other assistance. The school and the parent community aid teachers during assessment periods by providing one day each eight weeks without student contact so teachers may analyze assessment information and regroup students. Hansen coordinates this process and actively involves grade-level teaching teams.

• **One-on-one tutoring.** The school provides first- through third-grade students struggling in reading with daily tutoring by specially-trained instructional assistants. These paraeducators, most bilingual, are considered important to Highland's instructional effectiveness. They meet together and receive training each week, like the other teaching staff, and have a regular caseload of students with whom they work daily.

Nothing comes between Highland students and reading...

• **Early childhood education.** To offer assistance to students needing early intervention, Highland piloted a full-day kindergarten program during the 2000–2001 school year. The program emphasizes language development, readiness, and positive self-concept, and is funded largely through the school's Reading Excellence grant. A literature-rich environment surrounds the kindergarten students. They have daily opportunities to sample big books and to pursue activities and games that promote learning about print, the alphabet, oral and written composition, and math concepts.

• **Family Support Team.** Highland also has assembled an ongoing Family Support Team. This staff team promotes involving parents, increasing attendance, and integrating community and school resources. The Family Support Team also develops plans to meet needs of students having difficulties succeeding. A subgroup called the "Core Team" includes the principal, assistant principal, instructional facilitator, counselor, community outreach coordinator, literacy grant coordinator, and two classroom teachers. The Core Team meets weekly to solve problems and ensure policies work as intended. Once a month the larger Family Support Team meets to evaluate building-wide issues. The larger team encompasses the core team and other building stakeholders, such as the office manager and other classroom teachers.

• **Training/staff development.** Judy Hansen has coordinated all SFA training at Highland. Initially, all staff received three days of training from external SFA trainers. The school also benefited from three two-day follow-up visits during the first implementation year. Beyond this, it has been Hansen's job to make sure SFA is going well throughout the school. The staff discuss program strategies and concerns with Hansen in weekly staff development and component meetings. All staff members receive one-on-one assistance via classroom visits and coaching.

• **Homework.** SFA's program requirement that all students spend 20 minutes a night reading at home dovetails perfectly with many Highland parents' wishes that their children receive nightly homework. Reading skills are reinforced at home. Students can choose the books and parents sign a homework sheet each night verifying that their child read.

Implementing SFA at Highland Elementary is an intense, consuming process. Most staff were not accustomed to the coordination, teaming, and accountability required. Time devoted to learning, implementing, and monitoring the program has been immense. When asked about some of the hurdles Highland overcame to successfully implement SFA, Judy Hansen mentions finding space for SFA materials, finding space for reading groups, creating a master schedule for 90-minute reading blocks, providing ample planning time for teachers (knowing that SFA is not the only thing with which they contend), building a pool of substitutes skilled to teach SFA, ensuring all teachers receive adequate training, bringing new staff up to speed, and providing professional development in subjects other than reading.

In a word, implementing the program is daunting. Yet, Highland hopes to be among the many schools who find after several years, it has been well worth their effort. Staff look to benefits generally cited as SFA results, including improved reading scores (especially for students in the lowest quartile of their class), decreased special education placements, decreased in-grade retention, enhanced parent involvement, and improved attendance.

Partnerships are everywhere at Highland; it's how the school builds community...

Come on in, All Partners Welcome

It is difficult to imagine Highland Elementary's success level during the past five years without the partnerships the school has established. Partnerships are everywhere at Highland; it's how the school builds community, within its walls and beyond. Highland works continually to build partnerships that involve the whole community, based on principles such as site-based management, team building, and comprehensive school improvement. Highland's journey began with the school's involvement, beginning in 1998, in a school improvement process called Onward To Excellence (OTE, developed by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory). The journey continued with staff—and community—building from the base established through OTE. A CSRD grant stimulated self-reflection focused on characteristics of effective comprehensive school reform. These two milestone efforts helped the school community "learn how to process together," says Judy Hansen. The Highland staff and community realized they had voice and the power to create positive change.

There are the obvious partnerships at Highland—ones you hope a school would establish—such as partnerships with individual parents, parent associations, and the district. There are more unexpected partnerships that add texture and dimension to the school and that enhance what it offers children. These include collaboration with the county, the neighborhood association,

the faith community, and other professionals throughout the greater Salem area.

Traditional school partnership or not, the involvement isn't typical at Highland. Typical partnerships are often limited by boundaries and turf issues. Teachers may be in favor of volunteers working with students, for example, but be reluctant to spend time preparing materials to facilitate such relationships. Or, the school may be thrilled that the neighborhood wants to support it, but unwilling to open the building after school hours for neighborhood meetings. In both examples, educators are within their rights. Yet, in order for partnerships to flourish—in order for students to reap the full benefits of a community—the school must extend itself and work toward substantive relationships with its partners. Sometimes, that means inconvenience or compromises. At Highland, it means opening the schoolhouse doors to volunteers, meetings, activities, and ideas. It also means getting to know those individuals who will take time to get involved.

For many years, the Parent Club/Parent Advisory Committee at Highland had little impact on what happened at the school. Cindy and Gary Williams went to their first Parent Club meeting at Highland when their oldest daughter entered kindergarten. About 10 people attended, average attendance then. The group was without good leadership, and they assumed key responsibilities, Gary to become the chairperson of the Parent Club and Cindy to serve as both treasurer and secretary.

When asked why, as parents, they got involved with the school, Cindy has a two-part answer. First, they wanted to model community involvement for their two daughters. Second, they saw parents of school-aged children as an untapped resource and wanted to do their part to improve the school. They disregarded comments from friends and co-workers, who asked them why they even bothered with that school. "Why don't you just put your kids in another school?" some persisted. Cindy remembers saying, "Let's take the challenge, not run from it." She was convinced there was hope for Highland.

In their first months as leaders the Williams asked parents, "What school issues are most important to you?" Not everyone agreed initially, but the group soon gravitated toward discussions of school safety. There was gang activity in and around the Highland Elementary area and this disturbed parents. Parents pondered and researched what they might do to increase safety. Their solution was to campaign for a uniform school dress code, a basic set of clothing options for all students. Students could wear the colors navy, white, khaki, and dark green. No jeans would be allowed. Goals of the policy were (a) to decrease gang influence by preventing students from wearing "gang colors," (b) to diminish lines between have's and have-nots, and (c) to increase school pride and a sense of belonging. Teachers favored the idea, so the Parent Club sent a survey to all parents to find out whether they would support the dress code. Overwhelmingly, 85 percent of parents agreed and signed on. The next step was to get approval from the school board. That occurred and the policy was put in place the following school year.

Suddenly, the once-a-month parent meetings were overflowing with attendees. Everyone was interested in the uniform idea and wanted to

give input. Even five years later, the meetings regularly draw around 60 parents. (Annual events, such as Parent Night, now draw more than 600 people.) The monthly Parent Club meetings are conducted in Spanish and translated to English for Gary and Cindy, who are usually the only non-Spanish-speaking participants. Prizes are raffled off as attendance incentives and free child care is provided. Meetings begin with Parent Club discussions (this group operates in a fashion similar to a booster club) and then move on to Parent Advisory Committee discussions (this group is a sounding board for the school, offering guidance when appropriate). A teacher presents at each meeting as well.

Commitment to Highland Elementary School extends beyond the teachers and parents. The school has actively sought out relationships with many sectors of the community. To ensure that students are healthy, the district established a partnership with the county in 1992 to offer children and families from low-income homes basic health care. Highland Elementary provides office space and open arms to three professionals who coordinate health and social services to students qualifying for free or reduced-priced lunches, as well as to their below-school-aged siblings. Called the Child Health Initiative (CHI), this partnership is supported by many local and state groups. It provides day-to-day service to many Highland children. When a student needs clothes, CHI provides a sack of new garments consistent with Highland's dress code. When a family needs food, the partnership arranges to have a food box delivered. When a student needs dental care or immunizations, CHI partners with Northwest Medical Teams (a volunteer medical organization) to connect children with needed services. CHI also provides families with smoke detectors, bicycle safety classes, and free bike helmets during various campaigns.

Commitment to Highland Elementary School extends beyond the teachers and parents. The school has actively sought out relationships with many sectors of the community.

The ever-growing Highland Neighborhood Association is another essential Highland Elementary partner. The school and association are inextricably linked—both recognize the importance of their symbiotic relationship. When the school flourishes, so does the neighborhood. When the neighborhood is healthy and safe, so is the school. Several Highland staff are Neighborhood Association members. This allows the association to better understand the school's needs and allows the school to hear firsthand any neighborhood concerns. The school offers the building as the association meeting place. The association assists the school when there is a need to get messages out about parent night or other activities, and to call for volunteers.

This school-neighborhood partnership is exemplified through the neighborhood's annual Fourth of July parade. The school is on a modified year-round calendar and Highland kids are in school over the Fourth. The Neighborhood Association organizes a parade that stars Highland students. Each class selects a theme for their participation and spends time preparing decorations. The parade winds through the neighborhood, with proud parents, community members, and even news media looking on. It is a community highlight each year.

Highland Elementary School's partnership with the faith community also results in gains for Highland students. Volunteers from area churches commit to acting as "Reading Buddies" for Highland students who need added reading practice. The current Reading Buddy program is the brainchild of a community group called the Salem Leadership Foundation, which organizes and advertises the program. The Foundation saw the need for volunteers in some of Salem's needier schools, and tapped talent in area churches. Students from Salem's North High School and Willamette University are also involved in Reading Buddies. Sam Skillern, of the Salem Leadership Foundation (and also a Reading Buddy himself), acts as the liaison between Highland and the volunteers. The Reading Buddy effort is a natural outreach in his mind. "If a church is in a neighborhood, why can't it help the neighborhood?" he asks.

Now in its fourth operational year, the Reading Buddy program couples an adult with a first- or second-grade child. The pairs meet together once a week for 30 minutes. The Buddies offer reading instruction and strategies, but the volunteers know that Highland staff, specifically the program coordinators, are also available for consultation. The goal is for children to receive one-on-one attention and a little extra reading assistance from a caring adult. School staff work to make sure all volunteers have a positive experience at Highland, knowing that satisfied volunteers return and can also become school advocates in the community. The strategy is working. During the 2000–2001 school year, Highland had more than 70 Reading Buddy volunteers.

More Time, More Learning

The 2000–2001 school year marks Highland's sixth year using a modified year-round calendar. Highland (one of seven district schools utilizing a year-round model) implemented this calendar to improve instruction rather than to free up classroom space (often the motive for a year-round calendar). Parents felt the long summer break was detrimental to many students, who often receive little educational reinforcement over the summer and return to school in the fall needing review. Highland's modified calendar brings students to school from September through the first week of December, then the school is on vacation, or "intercession," until the beginning of January. The school is in session from January through March, and on intercession from the last week of March through mid-April. School continues through the first part of July, when the year concludes. This calendar helps prevent learning loss so common over summer months. Highland teachers, skeptical at first, have adjusted very well.

The academic intercessions, a by-product of the modified calendar, have proven invaluable. Between fall and winter, and winter and spring sessions, a week of intensive instruction is offered to students who are at risk of being retained or are making inadequate progress toward state benchmarks. Participants spend five mornings receiving math and reading instruction plus instruction in effective study skills such as summarizing, questioning, and predicting. Intercession classes have a 5:1 student to teacher/instructional assistant ratio. Overall, no more than 60 students at a time are involved in academic intercession. Highland teachers who opt to teach during academic intercession are paid an attractive hourly wage plus a per diem.

Activities provided by Highland's full-fledged after-school program, Highland Elementary Reaching Out for Enrichment and Success (HEROES), are open to all students during intercession afternoons, during three seven-week sessions during the regular school year, and during a summer session. Field trips and other enhancement experiences, such as swimming, bowling, and visits to the State Capitol, a fish hatchery, and the local Children's Museum, are provided. A variety of classes are offered, as well as Lightspan (a supplemental reading program that uses video game equipment to reinforce reading and math skills). Tutoring is also available to third- and fifth-grade students needing assistance in meeting state benchmarks.

HEROES had a modest beginning in 1999, serving 140 students two days a week during two seven-week sessions. Highland parents, the neighborhood community, and the school worked together to secure funding, including grants from the Oregon Adult and Family Service Division and Starbuck's Coffee Company Foundation. Many local businesses and agencies made in-kind donations of goods and services. Highland's 21st Century Community Learning Center grant and its Reading Excellence grant, helped make expansion to the current level possible.

HEROES now has qualified leadership, including Brenda Jamison, site grant coordinator, and Carolina Broderick Sanchez, community outreach coordinator. Three additional staff members and many college work-study students keep the program running. But, volunteers and partnerships assist to make the program work. Well over 40 parent and community volunteers supervise students, prepare materials, and teach classes.

The number and range of partnerships with businesses and agencies seem endless. To mention just three: the YWCA provides math and science enrichment courses for girls; the Humane Society provides courses on animal care and safety; and Chemeketa Community College offers adult education classes in English as a Second Language, GED preparation, and basic literacy for parents and other volunteers.

The bottom line of the HEROES after-school program is student learning. Learning is ever-present in the minds of all staff and volunteers. Yes, students have fun, look forward to coming each day, and have opportunities to learn in new and exciting areas. But, if the program ceases to further students' academic success, it ceases to be effective.

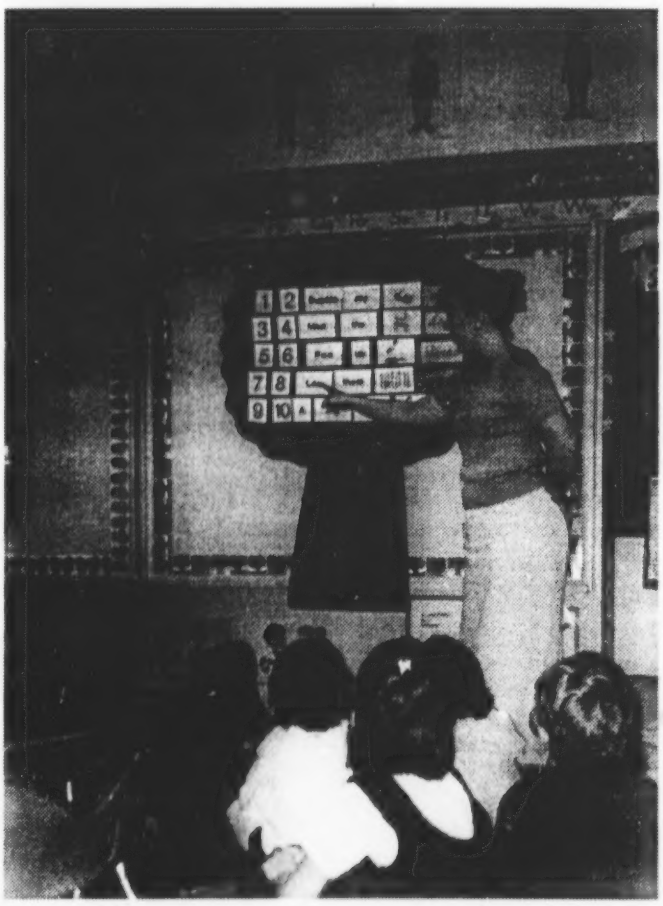
Alignment

It is safe to say that at Highland Elementary, as at other Oregon schools, legislated system-wide reform has been challenging. Ten years after the Oregon Educational Act for the 21st Century was passed, Highland and most Oregon schools are still working to put pieces into place. As standards and high-stakes testing have been gradually phased in, the pressure for students—and, thus, schools—to perform has mounted. To ensure that students meet standards, Highland has worked vigorously to align its curriculum duringthe past five years. In the aligned system that Highland envisions, the materials teachers use, the instructional methods, and the assessments that measure student learning are all connected to the same foundation.

The Salem-Keizer School District empowered schools to work toward alignment by utilizing its existing Teacher Leader model. (This system recognizes highly competent teachers in each school building and elevates them to resident expert status within their individual schools.) Teacher leaders became liaisons between the district's central office and school buildings. Third-grade teacher Jessica Smith serves as Highland's teacher leader. She is the in-house professional development specialist and school site-council chair.

Through Smith, Highland receives pertinent information and training relevant to standards and pending changes in district requirements. Through Smith and the Site Council, the district receives information about what's working and what's not. Smith is paid a small stipend by the district for her extra work.

Smith shares responsibility for Highland's curriculum alignment with Ruby Price. As teacher leader, Smith meets monthly with teacher leaders from other schools at the central office. They discuss standards-related issues and receive relevant training. Additional training and inservice assignments keep Smith abreast of state requirements. Smith also provides Highland staff with training opportunities. To accommodate this training system, Highland typically chooses an area of instructional focus (such as writing or math) to target for a specified length of time as a "schoolwide project." Smith arranges for staff training on the selected schoolwide project. Teachers practice newly-acquired strategies in their classrooms, gather student work samples, and convene to score work samples consistent with state assessment approaches. Teachers then have a clear, unified idea of state expectations and a team atmosphere in which to learn and practice. This method ensures that curriculum, instruction, and assessment are in line. The standards-related trainings Smith arranges are carefully balanced, also, with other professional development requirements (e.g., Success for All training).



The most publicly visible part of a school's alignment process is its assessment. The public hears plenty from the media about the tested curriculum. Highland has responded to this emphasis by communicating to parents and students the importance of all tests. (In elementary school, students are tested primarily in writing, reading, and math.) Students understand and take state standards and assessments very seriously. At Highland test preparation is a focus. School time is used for simulated test sessions almost identical to actual assessments, and after-school tutoring exists for struggling students in benchmark grade levels. Meeting standards is not exclusively the third- and fifth-grade teachers'

responsibility, however. Helping students meet standards is an expectation for the entire staff, beginning when students are in kindergarten and continuing in each grade. In daily lessons, teachers talk with students about problem-solving strategies relevant to state assessments. It becomes a language students know and understand. Students anticipate state assessments as an opportunity to show what they know. Teacher teams work during the school year to examine standards and related assessments and plan accordingly. In November, they begin discussing coming assessments to make sure they are on the right track, and they are in constant communication throughout the year.

As part of the school's ongoing alignment process (required by the district), Highland staff updates a Comprehensive School Improvement Plan (CSIP) each year. As a CSRD school, however, the district permits Highland to use its CSRD plan (a more in-depth plan) in place of the CSIP. All staff participate in the annual revision, which includes an examination of relevant assessment and school data, goal setting in accordance with data, and an updated action plan.

Standards have caused a certain amount of stress among Highland teachers, but it seems they have accommodated in order to move forward. Smith feels that the state's academic standards have served to improve instruction at Highland. She says the quality and scope of assessments have moved far beyond standardized tests of decades past. This has prodded schools to align their curriculum and instruction to create a more seamless, consistent system.

The Sum of the Parts

Much happens at Highland on a daily basis—many pieces make this school hum. Nonetheless, no staff member seems to be able to describe what he or she does in isolation from the others. All pieces are interrelated. Administrators, teachers, and support staff continually learn and work as a team to make Highland a school that never settles for mediocrity. They carefully match their practice with state standards. They share a common vision for learning, with reading as the root of instruction. They actively seeks partnerships with parents and the community, which enable the school to offer students a vast support network and which, in turn, benefit the entire community.

...many pieces make this school hum.... All pieces are interrelated.

At Highland Elementary School, the bottom line is student learning—regardless of circumstances, regardless of obstacles. With that simple commitment and shared dream for the school, this small group of educators has made a vision of success reality. Teachers at Highland will not say it's been easy, but they will agree it's been worth it.

Research in Practice: Analysis & Discussion

Three overarching principles underlie education at Highland Elementary: (1) promotion of student learning above all and no excuses for failure, (2) inspired leadership by a principal who is an instructional leader, and (3) continuous staff learning. On this foundation rest support blocks consisting of effective gathering and use of resources, a sustained bilingual program, and consistent classroom management and instructional strategies. The reform success at Highland can then be attributed to four content pieces: a shared staff focus, extended learning opportunities, parent and community partnerships, and curriculum alignment.

Shared Focus

Much has been written in recent years about the benefits to schools of developing a shared focus. Often thought of as "mission" or "vision," the intent is to bring a group to consensus about their collective purpose and goals. Experts in education regularly profess the importance of a shared focus in a school's ability to effectively serve its students (DuFour, 2000; Rossi & Stringfield, 1995; Sammons, Hillman & Mortimor 1995; Zigarelli, 1996). Accordingly, most schools now have some sort of formal statement that communicates their aspirations for students. The concept, in principle, has broad acceptance. Unfortunately, many schools believe that a vision statement in and of itself is enough. In reality, a vision statement is nothing more than words until action is taken to make it a tangible part of a school's culture. It has to be a focus shared by all staff and imparted to all students and families.

A first sign of a shared focus at Highland Elementary is the common terminology used by all staff. It's not just Principal Ruby Price who uses words like "relentless," "respect," and "all students," it's everyone in the school. They recognized long ago that success would not be achieved until these concepts were part of their mindset and these words part of their vocabulary. Regardless of role, everyone at Highland understands his or her purpose to be student success. Highland's extensive teaming furthers the shared purpose. Teams accomplish tasks of every sort—from refining instructional strategies to defining school policy. There are very few things happening in the school that aren't supported through group consensus. The shared instructional emphasis, in reading and through the Success for All model, provides additional cement binding the school community members together as a cohesive unit.

These components contribute to the concept of a shared focus: (1) unity of purpose, (2) consistency of practice, and (3) collegiality and collaboration (Sammons, 1995). These components can be simplified into three words: philosophy, action, and relationships. When a staff shares a philosophical base, responds with consistent action, and builds quality relationships in the process, they are working with shared focus.

In the whole spectrum of school improvement efforts, a shared focus is probably the least expensive. It requires nothing more than a

"meeting of the minds," so to speak, which, in monetary terms, is free. Even more encouraging is the effect a shared focus has on student achievement. Zigarelli (1996) analyzed three years of National Educational Longitudinal Study data in his study of effective school variables and found an achievement-oriented school culture to be one of three effective school characteristics that had a positive impact on student achievement. He describes indicators of an achievement-oriented culture to be "high expectations for students, frequent monitoring of student progress, emphasis on basic skill acquisition, a significant amount of time in class, and a clear, academically oriented mission of the school." In addition, an effective school is "a place where teachers get along with one another and are satisfied with their work environment" and where student performance and high teacher morale connect. In short, shared *philosophy* + consistent *actions* + quality *relationships* = benefits for kids.

The step-by-step process a school uses to establish a focus is not as important as the elements that make it happen. First, and foremost, a shared focus must be just that—shared. Developing a focus should be a collaborative process that gives all members an opportunity for input (Smith & Stolp, 1995). Some schools find that targeting a specific program or problem can serve to bring various parties together (Lashway, 1999; Rossi & Stringfield, 1995), much like Highland Elementary has a focus on reading instruction and shared philosophies of student success. Researchers also recommend things such as involving all stakeholders, working in teams, committing to an evolving process, and pursuing shared dreams as other ingredients essential to the process (Smith & Stolp, 1995). Additionally, it is critical to use relevant school data to inform the process along the way. DuFour (2000) asserts, "Using data is the most effective strategy for translating the good intentions described in a vision statement into meaningful school improvement targets." He advises that schools "be willing to assess their current reality with total candor and honesty, and then describe the specific, measurable results they expect to see as a result of achieving their vision."

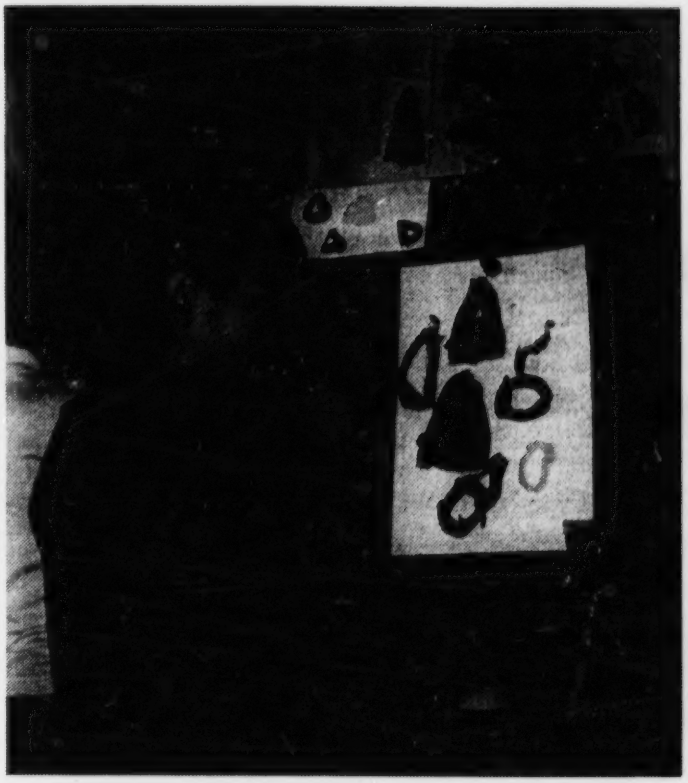
Raywid (1994) sums up the significance of shared focus clearly by saying, "An effective theme or focus should have transformative power—which is not always so much a function of the theme's quality as of the seriousness with which it is taken."

Extended Time for Learning

Shortly after the publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983, legislatures in many states began adding days to the school year and minutes to the school day. More recently, however, educators have begun trying to find new and different ways to extend student learning opportunities, rather than merely pumping hours into the traditional schedule. These attempts have been bolstered at the national level through the U.S. Department of Education's emphasis on community learning centers, specifically through 21st Century Community Learning Center funding. The change is also evident at the state and local levels, where schools are regularly granted requests to modify school days, weeks, and years to accommodate extended learning for both staff and students.

Highland Elementary offers an array of efforts aimed at providing students with learning options beyond the typical school day. The modified school calendar offers more frequent vacations and fewer extended absences. The idea, of course, is that teachers spend less time reviewing material students may forget over longer breaks. Research generally supports this approach, finding that it benefits students' abilities to retain information and more readily build upon their knowledge base with new learning (Curry, Washington, & Zyskowski, 1997; Haenn, 1996; Sheane, Donaldson, & Bierlein, 1994). Academic intercessions (the weeks of intensive learning offered to the school's struggling students) are unique to modified and year-round calendar arrangements. Haenn (1996) calls them "one of the most distinguishing characteristics" of such calendars because teachers are able to offer students targeted remedial assistance during the year. Sheane et al. (1994), in their discussion of modified school calendars, say that with more intercessions throughout the year, students "no longer have to experience nine months of failure before receiving assistance."

Through a couple of non-traditional arrangements, Highland Elementary students also have access to tutoring. During the regular school day, students exhibiting particular literacy difficulties are provided with targeted, daily tutoring from trained paraprofessionals. And, third- and fifth-grade students needing extra assistance in meeting state benchmarks can take advantage of after-school tutoring provided by licensed teachers.



Tutoring is but one of many learning opportunities offered to Highland students after school, a stretch of time that has gained tremendous importance in the minds of many educators. Knowing that the vast majority of children now live in homes without adult supervision after school (U.S. Department of Education, 2000), educators see this window of time as either a threat or promise, depending upon how it is used. Students can either benefit from educational enrichment or be susceptible to involvement in illegal and high-risk behaviors. Certain statistics make this point painfully evident:

- 29 percent of all juvenile offenses occur on school days between the hours of 2:00 p.m. and 8:00 p.m.
- 47 percent of violent juvenile crime occurs during that same time frame

- Children are also at a much greater risk of being the victim of violent crime during the hours after school. (Safe and Smart, 1998)

Building and operating an after-school program is no small feat. Highland's program director has equated it with running a small city. It involves a great deal of administration, community partnering, instruction, discipline, transportation, and parent relations, among other things. Program staff have to be especially flexible. There are days when a volunteer doesn't show up as scheduled, the computers go down, or buses don't show up on time. It's part of the job, and staff come to expect the unexpected. As long as certain pieces, or elements, of effective programs are in place, even the unexpected is manageable.

Successful programs respond to community needs....

What extended time elements work best? Research has yielded no definitive answers, according to a study of 34 after-school programs cited by Fashola (1999). There is, however, some agreement about the components of good programs. First and foremost, "Successful programs respond to community needs: their creation is the result of a community effort to evaluate the needs of its school-age children when school is not in session" (Safe and Smart, 1998).

Additional elements of quality programs are:

- Goal setting and strong management (Caplan & Calfee, 1999; Fashola, 1999; Safe and Smart, 1998)
- Quality after-school staffing (Caplan & Calfee, 1999; Fashola, 1999; Safe and Smart, 1998)
- Attention to safety, health, and nutrition issues (Caplan & Calfee, 1999; Safe and Smart, 1998)
- Effective partnerships with community-based organizations, juvenile justice agencies, law enforcement, and youth groups (Safe and Smart, 1998)
- Strong involvement of families (Caplan & Calfee, 1999; Fashola, 1999; Safe and Smart, 1998)
- Coordination of learning to learning activities in the regular school day (Caplan & Calfee, 1999; Fashola, 1999; Safe and Smart, 1998)
- Linkages between school day and after-school personnel (Safe and Smart, 1998)
- Evaluation of program progress and effectiveness (Caplan & Calfee, 1999; Fashola, 1999; Safe and Smart, 1998)

Among the many benefits researchers find associated with after-school programs are better grades and conduct in school, as well as better peer relations and emotional adjustment (Posner & Lowe Vandell, 1994). Other literature on the subject cites improved school attendance and work habits (Mott Foundation, 1999), reduced rates of grade retention, reduced juvenile crime, and even higher aspirations for the future for participating students (Safe and Smart, 1998).

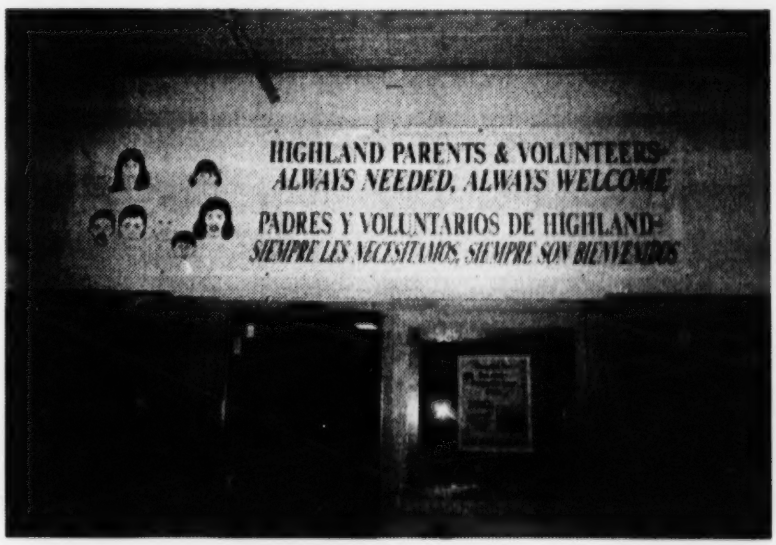
Partnerships

Increased partnering between schools and the communities they serve may be what educators welcome most about the public's renewed interest in education. Heightened scrutiny and accountability for school success have, in this arena, worked to the advantage of schools. More Americans are aware how much schools can benefit from community involvement. As a society, we push for a say in how schools are run, but with that voice comes responsibility. Fortunately, countless Americans are taking part in what has become an era of educational partnerships and service. Thanks to groups like the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, Big Brothers Big Sisters of America, YMCAs, YWCAs, and to comprehensive funding of partnership efforts like the 21st Century Community Learning Centers, more Americans are involved as school partners today than ever before.

Partnerships are limitless in scope. They can be as small as one person volunteering in one classroom, or as large as a multi-million dollar corporation partnering with schools in a specific region or state, such as the Albertson's Foundation in Idaho, or the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation in the Pacific Northwest. Partnerships can receive sponsorship from government agencies, non-profit organizations, private companies, faith groups, or schools themselves. Educational partnerships may be "school community initiatives," "community learning centers," or "coalitions," each with its own twist, but the essence is the same in all: to underscore the importance of communities actively assisting and participating in the education of youth.

The most important reason for partnerships is also the biggest advantage—shared ownership in needed solutions. In discussing the power of partnerships (specifically coalitions), Peterson-del Mar (1994) says partnerships "have the potential to bring a vast amount of energy to bear on problems too large for a single school or even district to overcome." As a case in point, Highland Elementary School would find it financially and physically impossible to provide all the opportunities currently available to its students without its numerous partners, from Reading Buddies and the Child Health Initiative staff to parent groups and the vast after-school offerings of HEROES. Together, these groups work with Highland staff to meet a high-risk student population's needs.

Any school should partner first with parents. On the vast landscape of educational research, few dispute the importance of parent involve-


HIGHLAND PARENTS & VOLUNTEERS
ALWAYS NEEDED, ALWAYS WELCOME
PADRES Y VOLUNTARIOS DE HIGHLAND
SIEMPRE LES NECESITAMOS, SIEMPRE SON BIENVENIDOS

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ment—quite simply, it works. The U.S. Department of Education (1997) notes that "research over the past 30 years has consistently shown that greater family involvement in children's learning is a critical link to achieving a high quality education and a safe, disciplined learning environment for every student."

In addition, educators' efforts to welcome and involve parents are more important than parents' income, education level, marital status, or place of employment (U.S. Department of Education, 1997; Epstein, 1988).

Partnerships with other community members and organizations are important, too—and growing more so as the nature of school-community partnerships changes. In a 1989 survey of school-community partnerships, Heaviside and Farris reported that the two most frequent types of support provided by education partnerships were (1) guest speaking, demonstrations, and facilities lending, and (2) special awards, scholarships, or incentives for students. Nowadays, schools and community partners are looking for more substantive relationships that address immediate student learning needs. For example, if a school has to choose between a community partner providing needed clothing or needed tutoring, tutoring will likely be chosen because tutoring translates more readily into improved student achievement.

Partnerships are particularly beneficial for schools with predominantly at-risk populations, such as Highland. Students and surrounding neighborhoods reap rewards from multiple partnering layers. In their study of school-community partnerships in schools with high at-risk populations, Brooks, Kavanaugh, and Pedroza (1995) discuss the evolving context of school-community relationships. They observed several features in schools with active community relationships, including:

- School is offered as a community resource
- The school conducts outreach
- Adult education is available
- All stakeholders are involved
- School administration is collegial
- Constant communication informs evaluation

Partnerships seem most effective when symbiotic and sustained. When schools attain these qualities, functions gradually strengthen, beginning with school climate (Melaville, 1998) and success ripples from there.

Alignment

Although analysts continue to debate the virtues and drawbacks of the standards movement, state standards and assessments are likely to be a feature of the educational scene for years to come. Systems for school accountability are in place in virtually every state, and standards enjoy far-reaching support in the education world and beyond. In their 1995 report, *Assignment Incomplete: The Unfinished Business of Education Reform*, Public Agenda (a public opinion research group) surveyed more than 2,000 Americans about their views of educational reform. Regarding standards, they found "Americans strongly and consistently support higher academic standards and that, while enforcing higher standards will have consequences, Americans surveyed are convinced that higher standards will improve student motivation and consequently increase learning."

For students to meet standards, teaching must be consistent with those standards. Students need to understand how they will be tested and how daily instruction is congruent with the tests. In short, the written, taught, and tested curriculums must be aligned. Webb (1997) defines alignment as "the degree to which expectations and assessments are in agreement and serve in conjunction with one another to guide the system toward students learning what they are expected to know and do." Alignment provides educators with a road map, taking them piece by piece from where they are to where they need to be.

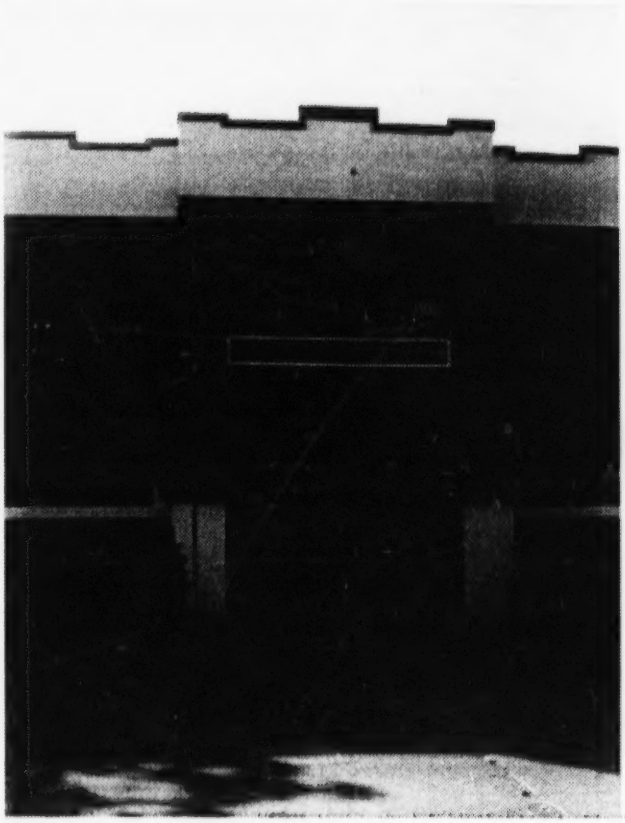
There is no shortage of expert advice on how to align curriculum, but the process varies from school to school. Regardless of procedure, certain core elements are key to any alignment process. First, educators look at expected outcomes. They need to know what the state expects students to know in all curriculum areas. Educators chart their instructional course grade by grade, subject by subject. For example, if a state expects students to answer a math story problem correctly and also discuss in writing how they arrived at the answer, teachers must provide students ample opportunity to practice similar strategies in daily class experiences. This translates tested curriculum into the taught and, ultimately, into what students learn.

After schools determine what their students are expected to learn, a next step is a careful analysis of relevant data (Golden & Lane, 1998; Liebling, 1997; Squires, 1998; Webb, 1997). Relevant data obviously include standardized test data and other assessment information, but it may also include analysis of additional factors such as student behavior, attendance records, and parent involvement. Such data analysis allows schools to have a clear understanding of their strengths and weaknesses and to set goals appropriate to their unique needs. Highland Elementary uses numerous forms of data each year to assess students, instruct them accordingly, and gauge the instructional effectiveness. Data come from many sources including student placement tests, Success for All eight-week assessments, student work samples, information about best practices, and feedback from community surveys and forums.

Generally, the next step in the alignment process involves mapping what will be taught by grade and subject with careful adherence to

standards, benchmarks, and assessment timelines. To ensure consistency, it is important that cross-grade teams conduct this activity (Squires, 1998). Finally, as instruction comes in line with assessments, the educators involved should examine textbooks and other resource materials for their level of alignment (Golden & Lane, 1998). Supplementary resources may be necessary if existing learning materials are found lacking.

To many, curriculum alignment is a common-sense approach to an integrated education system that works toward shared goals. In an aligned system, teachers and schools do not operate in isolation. As Webb (1997) notes, an aligned system can more effectively set priorities, allocate limited resources, and reduce unnecessary repetition. Done correctly, alignment can be a school's most powerful instructional ally.



Conclusion

Highland Elementary School has clearly made progress, and its reform efforts are congruent in many ways with research on student learning in school. With strong principal leadership, the school has gained focus. The entire school community has a common purpose that targets academic achievement directly, and there is a "no excuses" attitude about all students learning. Staff continually align the school's curriculum with local and state standards. They use data to determine the extent to which all students are meeting standards and to find weaknesses in student performance where additional work is needed. Time for learning, particularly in priority areas such as reading, has been extended. Not only do all teachers spend 90 minutes each day on reading, but there is additional time during the school day and after school for students needing extra help. One-to-one tutoring is available to students who need personal support. There is a strong focus on improving instruction, and teachers gain assistance from trained, in-school facilitators. The school's staff has time to learn together. Highland is a Spanish magnet school with a strong bilingual program and a high percentage of staff members who speak both English and Spanish. Parent involvement is strong and growing. These features enhance student learning.

The Highland Elementary School story points out the difficulties involved in truly moving to a point where all students are learning successfully. Even with all the research-based strategies this

school has implemented and some very successful years, only about half of the students meet standards in reading and math. The winds of change may have an effect on the outstanding achievements made by Highland over the past five years. Ruby Price, the principal who sparked so many of Highland's achievements, left the school after the 2000–2001 school year. Additionally, the Salem-Keizer School District has consolidated all schools onto a single, yearly calendar. The new principal has the potential to move forward to even greater achievements or to relax both pressure and support in some areas with the potential consequence of student performance returning to earlier lower levels. The calendar, which eliminates shorter breaks and academic intersessions, will necessitate creative thinking to find new opportunities for extended support to students in priority areas.

The Highland story is far from over. This is true, of course, for every other improving school as well. Sustaining reform with continuously improving results has been achieved by a very few schools, and it is usually a roller coaster ride with hills and valleys. While Highland has many challenges to overcome, the school has tasted success. Highland is a school worth watching.

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